

Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Filmmakers since the Islamic Revolution

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The New Iranian Cinema is appreciated today as perhaps the most fascinating cultural phenomenon and the most extraordinary “export commodity” produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The fact that its reception in the world is often accompanied by Iran’s image as a revolutionised, reactionary and anti-western country adds to its allure. The international audiences and the critics often ask themselves how such poetic and simply beautiful films could come from a country that has written jihad on its banners against cinema and all decadent, earthly art forms since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The book presented here consists of twelve interviews with the most renowned film-makers living and working in contemporary Iran. In their interviews they give first-hand insights about living and creating cinema in a revolutionised – and traumatised – society. They reflect upon the Iranian revolution and the influence of its aftermath on their work, as well as the effect of their work on the Iranian audience and their society. They dwell upon their reception in the West, on one hand, and their own influence on the making of Iran’s image and its reception in the world. They show how the seeds of New Iranian Cinema were sown decades before the revolution and how their efforts gave rise to a cinema that became a global phenomenon despite censorship, ideology wars, sanctions and political isolation. They say how they took sustenance from the works of western and global cineastes as well as from the deep and long tradition of art and poetry in their own country.

The book consists of 12 substantially edited interviews of 7,000 to 10,000 words each, plus an introduction by Shiva Rahbaran, of about 6,500 words (total length: approximately 120,000 words). The interviewees were selected on the basis of their significance and renown in Iran and the world. The directors interviewed are: Beyzaie, Kiarostami, Mehrjouii, Farmanara, Banietemad, Majidi, Panahi, Milani, Hatamikia and Makhmalbaf.

Except for one interviewee, the former head of the Farabi Foundation and House of Cinema, Mohammad Beheshti, all others are film directors, who live and work in Iran. The interview with Mohammad Beheshti is a key interview, however, as it dwells especially upon the role of the revolution and its culture institutes for the development of New Iranian Cinema. In this sense, the interview with Beheshti puts the whole book in a historical framework right at the outset.

All interviews, apart from the one with Mohsen Makhmalbaf, took place in Iran between 2007 and 2012, i.e. during the two periods of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad presidency (2005-2009 and 2009-2013).

The following summarises the book:

The introduction starts off with an account of the escalation of the regime’s animosity towards cinema manifested in the closure of the House of Cinema in December 2011. Now the artists were faced with yet more restrictions and

sabotage acts – from increasing censorship to banning films and imprisoning directors. It is shown how these developments were a consequence of the ideology of the Islamic revolution – a revolution which is paradoxically seen by many as the catalyst for the growth of intellectual cinema in Iran. The reasons for and the roots of the revolution's paradoxical nature (both as a modern phenomenon and a reactionary, religious movement) are briefly looked at in the introduction by showing Iran attempts at achieving modernity and modernism throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this historical context Iranian cinema - both before and after the revolution – is depicted as a modern art, which not only tried to break with tradition but also took sustenance from it. In the last part of the introduction, the time and place of the interviews, the structure of the book and the questions and the criteria by which the interviewees were chosen are shown.

All the interviews start with the same general question that asks the directors to look at the influence of the revolution on their work and the effect that their work has on both the Iranian audience and the global one – i.e. they are asked to look at themselves as identity makers of Iran, on one hand, and, on the other, as those whose identity is built by Iran, its history and its revolution. They are asked to show the roots of their art in Iran's history and traditions, as well as depict the influence of western culture and world cinema on their works.

The interviewees dwell upon the role of the revolution for the development and the promotion of Iranian film and in turn the role of Iranian films for the promotion of Iran globally. They all talk at length about formal and informal censorship (both before and after the revolution) and its 'liberating' and 'cleansing' aspects on one hand, and its 'stifling' mechanisms, on the other. The role of the government and its policies in both promoting and obstructing New Iranian Cinema is looked upon. The influence of western and 'capitalist' interests (expressed in form of western festivals or western production and distribution companies) on the development of Iranian cinema is discussed at length by the interviewees. All of them give their opinion on the further development of cinema in Iran.